

MTM/VF EIS

Community Narrative: Blair, West Virginia

Resident: Ya'll live in where? Pennsylvania, the steel mills?

Interviewer: Pennsylvania.

Resident: So, if you live close to a steel mill, chances your life is shortened, then if you're out in the country, is that right?

Interviewer: I'm sure there are all kinds of industries that have similar kinds of, you know the good and the bad that come with it, um, none probably as big as coal I think... But, (laugh) that's just my opinion so far, I mean, I haven't studied the other industries, so...

Resident: Okay.

Interviewer: Um, tell me a little bit about how you and your family originally came to live in Blair?

Resident: That's where I was born. My dad's a coal miner and he was in the coal mines for I think 35 years. So he help get me in the coal mine. I went to Cleveland in '54 when I finished high school. I got a job that ah, I just couldn't make ends meet. So, I come back to West Virginia and he help me get a job in the coal mines in '56. And that's where I spent ah... This is underground coal mining, I spent 3 years there. Laid off. Went back to Cleveland in '61, worked till '63. Come back to the coal mines, and I been there ever since.

Interviewer: Were you always doing underground or did you originally do...

Resident: I was always doing underground.

Interviewer: All underground.

Resident: Uh huh.

Interviewer: So you retired as an underground coal miner...

Resident: I had 34 years. I got black lungs. 'Course that comes from coal mining. 'Course they paid me for compensation, because of my lungs. To uh... I raised three children on the miner's income, so I give them the opportunity if they want to go to college. I told 'em I'd pay for it; they didn't... like me they didn't have the desire, so. The strip mining I don't know very much about it, just what I see. And my son works on strip mine but, I never did work on one. Ah.. they do, ah... they do tear the mountains off. They ah, pollute streams, that's still, ah, they still make a good living. It's the best paying job in West Virginia, far as I know, is coal mining.

Interviewer: When you...

Resident: When I lived at Blair, before I moved, I moved in '93, the strip mine hadn't come quite to my house. But by '94, after a year after I moved here, go back to my house where I live and I can see the dust from rock and stuff, you know, fly in the air. But ah, when I... asked them if they'd buy my place, they didn't come to me I went to them, they said yeah. I felt that they gave me a reasonable offer for mine; that's the reason why I'm here.

Interviewer: Let me back up and ask you, what was it that you liked about the community when you were growing up there, and when you lived there before the surface mining came in?

Resident: Okay, it was a community about 700 there were neighbors, and we knew everyone. We had softball teams; we had baseball teams. It was a nice community, clean and ah, I just enjoyed my childhood.

Interviewer: And you children were raised there?

Resident: Uh huh.

Interviewer: So they went to school in the area?

Resident: They went to school in Sharples, that's about six miles below Blair. That's a high school.

Interviewer: What was it that you would say that you noticed, or were there any changes that you noticed when the surface mining started in the community?

Resident: Right at the time, no. I can't tell where the community grew any, at that time. But by the end of it, by '94, '95 in that area, the coal company bought people out, as they did me. And today is only maybe 152–200 families, where there use to be maybe 700 or so. More than half have left out, Sharples, that's six miles below Blair. One particular place, Monclo, there's only two houses there, where at one time there was probably, maybe 80. So, you see what a fall that community had.

Interviewer: And you say you didn't see it grow any... and by that you mean you might, are you referring to the possibility that it would grow, some people moving in for jobs?

Resident: Yes. I'd say, didn't see very much grow, most, probably most the coal miners came from other communities. But Blair and Sharples did not have very much room to expand anyway.

Interviewer: In your experience, like with your son for example, is that a job that he got when the company came to your community or did people from the community get jobs there?

Resident: He worked as a supply clerk before he got the job on the outside, on the strip job. He worked in the supply house for the same company. I think he worked there, I don't remember, four or five years, and then the company gave him a job on the strip. And he's been working for them

every since.

Interviewer: He a clerk in the supply house?

Resident: Uh huh.

Interviewer: Okay. Um...and he, so he was working for them before the came into the community you said? Did I hear you...

Resident: No, he worked in the same community that the mines was in.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. Before they started mining there or?

Resident: The mines, let's see, really before the strip mines was in at the time that he started clerking or not, I don't know. I just can't remember back at that particular point.

Interviewer: So, you didn't really see any growth in the community. Were there any other positives that you might have seen? Was there benefits like to the community resources, like schools, or roads, or any thing like that?

Resident: Seen no benefits. And a very little harm, I'll put it that away.

Interviewer: And very little harm?

Resident: Uh huh. Now the deep mining and the strip mining is two different types of mining. Uh, your deep mining will affect your water, it will. Well, strip mining will hurt your water too, if its surface water, but if its under the ground, then I can't see were strip mining would hurt your water. But deep mining will hurt your water. I feel that deep mining is ah, far as the environment, would be more cleaner than strip mining, because they, they don't have the dust on the outside. Strip mining has very much dust, rock dust, and also coal dust, where your deep mining, your coal goes into railroad cars, instead of hauling them in trucks. So, I feel that strip mining is more dirtier than deep mining.

Interviewer: So, what were the few impacts, the negatives that you did see?

Resident: Fishing, streams, your water. We have a few fish out here, but nothing like it was when I was growing up, or before the mines come in. Hunting, I would say that it ah, the strip mining would affect hunting...

Interviewer: Uh huh, the habitat?

Resident:Deep mining I couldn't see where it would. The only thing you had is a few what that called site dumps. I guess ya'll got 'em in Pennsylvania? But strip mining is to me more harm to the environment then deep mining.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit... um, as you said there was maybe not a lot of benefits,

but not so many negatives either. Why did you approach the company to be bought out? What was... why did you decide to do that?

Resident: I knew that they would strip behind my house. I, my son knew how far they was gonna go, and any time you got strip mining you got a chance of a slide, especially in the spring. Here when we have a lot of rain, we have deep water, nothing to hold it back, so I felt that it was time. If I could, it was time for me to move out.

Interviewer: Was that a difficult decision?

Resident: It wasn't for me, but it was for my wife. She did... it took her a year or so to get use to the place, me – it didn't bother me 'cause I like the quiet neighborhood. She said it was too quiet for her, so... (laugh)

Interviewer: Just different things that you were looking for? Did you notice any changes in the community, when ah, when the population started to leave in terms of interacting with each other or the things that you have valued before in the community?

Resident: No, I didn't see no difference in personalities. I could see, as everybody else could see that the valuation of property and stuff was going down.

Interviewer: How did that work for you when you approached the company? Did you have someone come in and appraise it or did they?

Resident: Mmmm... Yes, I don't recall the guy's name, but he did come in. I gave him a price, what I felt that it was worth. And they come in and checked it, and they said it's fair enough for them.

Interviewer: Okay. So, you estimated what you wanted and what you thought it was worth and told the company. You didn't have a third party person come in and do a value?

Resident: No.

Interviewer: Okay. So the negotiations of the company were very simple?

Resident: Uh huh.

Interviewer: Do you feel like they satisfied, you know, what you had hoped...

Resident: Yeah, by... by me asking what I felt it was worth and they gave me my price. So, I felt that I got a square deal. I could probably held back, and ask for a higher price and I'd could probably got it. But I just stick with my price and they give it to me.

Interviewer: What kind of interactions did you have with the coal company about any thing else? For example did you discuss anything with them about... you said you didn't really have, at that point, they weren't that close to you... so you didn't have any impacts to your home to complain

about? Or did they ever approach you to find out?

Resident: No

Interviewer: Did you ever have interactions with the company about what they were going to be doing? I know you said your son knew...

Resident: No. Just my son knew everything what was going on. The company never approached me for nothing.

Interviewer: Did you ever see anything, ah, printed publicly about the permit activity, or what type of mining was going to go on in your community?

Resident: I never saw it. No.

Interviewer: No. Do you...

Resident: Now I asked the company, the company that... the man that I bought, that gave me the price of the land, or I asked... he did come in told me that I had six months after I sold to leave. He would go as much as a year to give me time to find me a place or to build, so I'd say he gave me a year.

Interviewer: Did he... was there any help with moving expenses or ...

Resident: No.

Interviewer: No... Was there any discussion about where you could move or where you would...

Resident: No.

Interviewer: No.

Resident: Yeah, yeah, I had to move ah... I had to move ah, out of what the company owned. At that time it was below Sharples, I can't recall the exact boundary line, but I couldn't move back in the neighborhood that I was in or Sharples. The neighborhood where the company was really, that's where the headquarters was at, the main office. I had to move out by that, but later on, now they did give some of them permits after they sold to rent the house that they lived in.

Interviewer: Explain that to me again. They did give who? Other property owners?

Resident: Un huh.

Interviewer: The ability to...

Resident: Stay in the same house.

Interviewer: To rent it out? Why would some one what to do that necessarily?

Resident: I don't know. (laugh) Well, if they was just gonna give me, say if I asked for \$100,000, they just gonna give me \$90 and if I wanna make agreement with 'em, you give me, so long a time to live in a house. What they done, they cut the rent down to like \$100 a month which is very cheap. It's just the way they work it, but at the time that I bought, now I was about the 3rd one that sold out, they didn't give me that privilege to do that. But there's some up there they did. Like later on I guess.

Interviewer: Did you ever discuss with them the possibility of buying back the land?

Resident: No. I never did. I wasn't gonna go back for one thing, and I never did have no desire to go back.

Interviewer: When they discussed with you limits to where you could move to, like with in the property areas that they owned and they were mining in, did ah, did you have the impression that was just for this current move? If you should have every wanted to move back in that area would that be allowed or just...

Resident: No, they didn't tell me I could ever move back into that area.

Interviewer: Just, you had to move out of that area.

Resident: Out of that area, yeah.

Interviewer: What kind of future... I know you don't live there now, but... what kind of future do you sort of see that the community of Blair may have now?

Resident: None.

Interviewer: Why... why do you think that is?

Resident: 'Cause I think the company is going back in there and strip again, their talking about opening it up again, on a different side of the mountain. Now whether the company will come in and buy those out up there now or not, I don't know. They may give 'em a fair price. And if they do go back in and give 'em a fair price, as I felt they did me, and give them the same opportunity I had... 'Course some of them don't wanna move. Ah, there was two or three cases, I'm not mentioning no names, where the evaluation of the house and property probably wasn't worth a \$100,000, but they was asking \$250,000. They was getting... they was wanting triple out of what they owned, and ah, but they wouldn't move because the company wouldn't give them the price that they was asking. Now although there is one or twp that got much more than what the value is that they got.

Interviewer: Do you think that was all on the up and up? Did uh, I know you said that some people were trying to get more, but uh, for example, do you think in your case that _____ people asked for things like repairs that weren't due to the mining or?...

Resident: I don't know. I know that there was some houses that when they set this blast off it did crack their cinderblocks and the sheet rock in their house. Now whether the company came in and gave them money for it or not, I don't know. 'Cause my house, I never had no trouble with mine.

Interviewer: And you never had any trouble with water either, right?

Resident: No, I had good water when I went there, and I had good water when I left. In fact, it was the best water in Blair. Even though it was a drill well, it wasn't surface water.

Interviewer: You said that they're gonna, they're talking about going back in there and opening up that mine, is that something you also heard from your son or did you see permit information in the paper?

Resident: He heard it, my son heard it, and it will probably be some time in this coming year. In 2002. Whether it's true or not, I don't know that.

Interviewer: Do you ever see those permits information in the paper or do you read the paper regularly?

Resident: No, I don't take the paper. No, I don't.

Interviewer: Part of what the study is looking at is, you know, what the evolution of the community was like before the mining, and during the mining and after the mining. So, I'd be interested in your thoughts on, I know we touched on it, each of those areas a little bit, over the, sort of, course of time how would you describe the changes over all?

Resident: I have to go back to uh, the time I moved, in '93. I would say it be on a downhill.

Interviewer: A downhill how, because the families were moving out or?

Resident: Families moving out. I didn't... I've not been back up where they stripped now. I don't know whether they reclaimed it after the job was done on it. That to me is a decline after I moved out. At the time I moved it was okay because it hadn't interfered with this part of the town.

Interviewer: Were there uh, I know you said that a number of people may of worked in surface mining, but not necessarily because that mine came in. Was there anyone in your experience who necessary benefited in terms of employment from the mining being right there?

Resident: Yeah, they had pretty good size operation, the strip mine. 'Course my son he got a job through that, and ah I'd have to say as far as employment, they done whole lot.

Interviewer: And in terms of just the community of Blair, if you could help me sort of understand was there a need for jobs in Blair? In the sense that you know, the mining coming in to that area was a direct benefit, did they hire local people for those jobs? Or are you speaking in a more broad sense, that the surface mining you know, is a benefit in terms of employment?

Resident: Its probably overall because we had, Sharples at that time had a deep mine. They had more one, at that time Westmoreland had two or three mines. So, far as the community, they's probably okay, but when the strip mine comes in people on the outside come in.

Interviewer: Did you ever see any changes in the schools, or any of the public facilities?

Resident: The schools dropped. I'll say the schools dropped considerable, ah course now, they don't even have a school up there. Both them schools are shut down.

Interviewer: In Sharples, where your children went?

Resident: Uh huh, where my children went, where my grandchildren went. Everything closed down, because of when that mine shut down it took a lot of people jobs.

Interviewer: So the things that you liked about that community, in terms of you know, it being quiet and a nice place to live, you said those have changed.

Resident: Uh huh.

Interviewer: Yeah.... Did I forget anything?

Interviewer II: I don't think so. I think you covered it.

Resident: She likes to talk, don't she? (laughter)

Interviewer: I tried to keep track in my head to make sure were covering everything. Did I not ask you anything about your experiences living over in that community with the surface mining that you wanted to talk about? We can get to the logging as well, but...

Resident: No.

Interviewer: You feel like you fairly well summed up what your experiences were?

Resident: Yeah, I feel that, um, okay, I can't hardly put the, I don't want to put the coal company down because they made my living for me.

Interviewer: Sure.

Resident: They helped me, of course I raised my family through coal mining, I got a retirement and whether I... I don't know how long that will last, but anyway I got one. So overall I think the strip mining could do a better job reclaiming the surface, that would put people that likes to hunt, that gives them more places to enjoy and ah that's pretty well, and we could talk about saw logging.

Interviewer: Yes, well let's do. Let me ask you one more question before we move on to that...

Resident: Okay.

Interviewer: ...It just occurred to me, but you have mentioned along with the hunting the fishing as well, and you thought that that had to do with the surface mining. How exactly, the streams, the impact on the streams?

Resident: The... when it rains, in the spring here when it rains, say we get two inches of rain, that's probably a bit below normal, cause we don't get much rain here, but anyway if we get two inches or more our streams are nothing but muddy water. (laugh) Be honest with 'ya, I don't know how the fish lives in it even today, cause it's so muddy when it rains. Because don't have nothing to hold the water back, not only mines, but like I say the saw logging too. And that takes care of the fishing part, far as the hunting part where the strip is at, the mountain that they took it. It would hurt them if they don't reclaim 'em, reclaim 'em and sew the grass and stuff back in for the deers. And as far as reclaiming and puttin' trees in there, I don't see where they're doing any good about that, which they should do it. They don't.

Interviewer: And that, it sounds to me like that an important part of your lifestyle and what you probably enjoyed doing, hunting, fishing?

Resident: Yeah, I was a hunter, hunting.

Interviewer: And was it all mostly recreational, or did you use that as well? ... I mean, I know my uncle for example often goes out hunting you know they make deer sausage, and all sorts of things so...

Resident: Mine was probably, it was both. That one there I killed it. That was one I killed in '74, but ah back when I was young I killed to eat. Now I can look at a squirrel and I can't kill because I don't like it. The same way with deer, I don't deer hunt. To me it's like a sport, like anything else it's enjoyable....

Interviewer: Okay. Well uh, why don't you tell me a little bit about what you wanted to share with us about the logging.

Resident: Is it all under about the same thing, coal mining, ya'll take that up?

Interviewer: Well, probably uh, probably what will happen, and I can't guarantee this... but you know, I'll share it with the project manager and its up to him to find the right person to pass it on to. The particular study that were looking at doesn't talk about logging...

Resident: Okay.

Interviewer: ...except how it would relate to, you know, if the coal companies were selling off the logs, or maybe that how it might...

Resident: Yeah, they do that. Yeah, the company usually they'll sell the logs before they do the stripping. They come in and take all the logs out then they strip. And when they take the logs out

they make, you know it's down here, cause you see plenty bull dozer roads, where they go in and get the timber. When they cut the timber down, they don't worry bout the cost of them. They got this deal here last year. And you sit here and watch these big trees fall and it makes you sick, especially if your hunter or sportsman. They come in here... they cut them down, leave the tops of them lay. Then you get a forest fire, and the forest fire get so big, out of hand there's and there's no way they control it, because of the tops of these trees. Anywhere they cut trees down, then you gonna have slides, where it wont hold the water back. So, here goes your, your game in the mountain - takes care of your streams and water, takes care of your fish. What they don't take the bulldozer tears it up, or they just let the trees fall over on this and tie um up. They're just not, to me, taking care of the mountains like they should, that's my feeling about it.

Interviewer: Umm hum. Now I've heard some people say that some groups actually encourage a certain amount of leaving behind, you know, logs or debris as almost habitat encouragement for animals. But are you saying that, you know, the extent that they're doing it is really beyond...

Resident: Too much, too much, yeah. They don't want to leave anything over six inches in diameter, they want to take everything bigger than that. It's through the range like that, in my lifetime, and in my kids lifetime, they can't see it get big enough to support anything.

Interviewer II: You know one thing that, you know, I noticed and we were talking about actually earlier today, is that if you look at a lot of the forest the size of the trees are pretty much the same. And they all look like they're probably, at most maybe 18 inches in diameter.

Resident: Yeah. And some of 'em and especially a beach tree, you can't use for nothing no way. To build houses cause you can't drive the nail through it. So they ain't worried about that beech tree. That's a squirrel's tree, see. They just take a bulldozer and push the stuff out of the way.

Interviewer II: Yeah. Right. I guess the question I was going to ask you, based on your memory in your lifetime, do you remember a time when there was less forest or had it been lumbered?... What it sort of tells me by the fact that there is... all the trees are about the same size and there are no huge trees, that probably within the last 50 years that there was a major lumbering...

Resident: Yeah, it hadn't been that long. Last uh...

Interviewer II: Actually, I would say probably in the '60s.

Resident: Last 30 to 40 years. Of course when I was growing up as a young boy 12-13 year old, all we had was big trees. And then see, they used, instead of using them bulldozers they used horses or mules and they didn't tear up the mountain and stuff like this bulldozer done.

Interviewer: So, what specific is it that they should be doing differently? Should they be limited to the areas they can log, and, and improving how they do it? Like not leaving behind the tops?

Resident: Tops yeah... and yeah.

Interviewer II: And more select it sounds like.

Resident: ‘Course the best tree they take is the best tree for the squirrel and that’s the oak. That’s the main timber, and hickory. I don’t know what they used that hickory for but they’ll cut them down too. It’s actually hard wood, I can’t drive a nail through one, so.

Interviewer: Have you ever had any discussions with the State about either the coal mining or the timbering from... you know, the State, environmental protection people?

Resident: No. ‘Cause I always felt that the Governor of West Virginia, like all the governors of other states, it’s a money racket. You can’t beat money no way, money’s gonna override you. And but it’s like up northern part of West Virginia, you got better roads, they cut more money out cause usually the Governor’s from up in that part of the state. But can’t one from Logan, I don’t think we’ll ever get one, cause it’s crooked (laugh). But the governor of Charleston right now, Wise, whether he ever been down this part of the country or not, I don’t know. You don’t hear of Welch, and all this places where you hear about all these floods. It’s caused from, I’ll say it’s caused from coal mining and from timber, that’s the two main sources. And one of them not bit worst then the other one. Only thing about coal mining is a lot of times you build a dam, if that dam breaks loose with all this water behind it, and that lets everything to us... that’s a bad thing, far as coal mining.

Interviewer: So at least that your saying, that at least they built the dam, or they tried to sort of deal with the issue?

Resident: Uh huh

Interviewer: Now I know they’ve had a lot of serious floods over near Welch recently, um, and in some other areas as well... Boone County.

Resident: Boone County’s bad. And it’s uh, well, you ever been up there, you’d see a lot of strip mines up in there. And like I say, they take the logs and everything else first so one of them’s not a bit more blame than the other.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you wanted to be sure to tell us, or share with us from your understanding?

Resident: No. I just trying to speak the truth about it. I’m not gonna up hold one no more than any other, but it’s just a situation that, ah all involve jobs. I know that. ‘Course coal mine takes care more jobs than saw mills does. ‘Cause one man going out there and cutting them trees down in one day, just one man can tear a lot of ‘em up. But overall irons out probably about the same.

Interviewer: So you’re happy living, living here now?

Resident: Yeah, I like it here. I’m between, I’m half way between Logan and Charleston. And except for Blair there, there’s only, as the worst part about it, is had to go all the way to Logan, which is 12–15 miles to a hospital. Here I am in very close reach.

Interviewer: And you have health concerns, and that’s important about...

Resident: Closer to the hospital, yeah. I can get to Charleston in 25 minutes. It takes about 25 minutes to get to Logan, so that's not to bad.

Interviewer: And you don't regret it at all then?

Resident: No. No, I do it of my own free will. Company didn't come to me, I went to them, so. Whether the rest of them did or not, now I... The rest of them, some of them probably went out on the same condition I did. They went and asked, because I knew the strip mines was coming through there and I felt that the quicker I get out, probably the better off I would be. Which I ain't regretted one bit. Even though I lived in Blair for practically all my life, 50 some years, I ain't regret a bit to come down here.

Interviewer: Did um, did you sign an agreement? You had mentioned about not moving into a specific area that they outlined...

Resident: Hummm...I don't recall whether I signed that or not. Or whether it was on a separate piece, or granted or not, I don't recall.

Interviewer: Well, like I said, I think we've covered all the questions I wanted to ask you, as long as there wasn't anything else you want to add... I want to be sure to give you that opportunity that I promised, so.

Resident: Well, (laugh) put it this way, help any... or help you any or not, when these coal companies comes through here and strip, they always put a gate up. So a 4-wheeler or nothing gets through there to hunt. I don't like it, and I guess the other guys don't either, you know, who likes to ride 4-wheelers and things. But they always put a gate up...

Interviewer: On their roads?

Resident: On their roads, where you can't get through. I can understand their part in a certain way, you know... if you got equipment in there, keeping people from stealing. But most time you got night watchman's things there, anyway. But they do put the gates up; they keep you out.

Interviewer: That's interesting you should mention that. We were just discussing that the sort of, the change that, that we've heard discussed as well in that regard... about a certain amount of public use of the land.

Resident: Uh huh.

Interviewer: So is that... that's definitely a change that you saw as well, then?

Resident: Strip mine, yeah, uh huh.

Interviewer: ...and that was when it was owned by, you know, neighbors, or people you know, or you knew?

Resident: Probably the coal company, no, probably the coal company owned the land, or they bought it off some other guy, you know that owned it, yeah. But after they get their equipment back in there, due to stripping, they closed the road off. Which it might be good, and it might be bad, cause they have to do it some way that they would not be responsible if somebody got hurt on the 4-wheeler. Because they had one over high-walls here, you know what a high-wall is?

Interviewer: Right. We've seen 'em.

Resident: So the company could not be responsible for something like that, if they run over, you know.... 'Course I got, to me, I got to an age where I got rid of my 4-wheeler, and I'm not able to do it. So, but I like to see young guys enjoy their life like I did mine.

Interviewer: When you were young and you lived in that community, the um... the coal companies maybe owned that land for underground mining, how, what was the situation then, with being able to ...

Resident: It was all together different. They didn't, I mean back then it was, these all were deep mines. Strip mining, this is a lot different from that, because you're blasting rocks. All together different from what deep mining is, and I feel that strip mining is more dirtier.

Interviewer: I'm glad you raised that point. That's a good point to bring up.

Resident: Only thing that's good about... I can see to strip mining is that you probably wouldn't have as much chance of getting black lung, as you would in deep mining. Still it's, it's not... I don't believe that strip mining is, is as clean as the inside. See, there's good parts and there's bad parts, I just told you the best I can (laugh).

Interviewer: No, I appreciate that, I really do. It's good for us to be able to talk to a number of people from the, these communities. And, and be able to hear these stories from different points of view and get a good picture of what went on, and what the experiences were like. Uh so we appreciate your taking the time.

Resident: Okay.

Interviewer: We really do. Okay.

Resident: Are ya'll Christians?